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# Non-traditional adult students: Reflecting about their characteristics and possible implications for Higher Education

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## Abstract

With this paper, the author has a great objective: to reflect about the implications that non-traditional adult students' growing presence may bring to Higher Education (HE) institutions. This reflection is even more important to be considered since many countries are starting to deal with an increasing number of non-traditional adult students' entering for the first time in HE, namely at undergraduate level. This is the case of Portugal. Consequently, this fact is raising several questions, particularly in what concerns the demands and roles that HE institutions need to assume when facing diversity and heterogeneity. The author intends to do a theoretical approach to this issue.

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## 1. Introduction: Contextualising the subject

The Portuguese Higher Education (HE) system is facing major challenges, part of them due to European educational policies where the Bologna Process and Lifelong Learning perspectives acquire a huge significance and value. More specifically, the increasing number of non-traditional 'publics' who are entering, for the first time, in HE institutions highlights the pertinence of questioning the new demands and roles asked to these institutions, namely concerning (i) the openness to diversity, (ii) the creation of new opportunities, (iii) the focus on equity, (iv) the implications on the teaching and learning process, among other aspects. In Portugal, there is starting to be a growing awareness concerning these aspects as a consequence to the diversity of students' profiles that attend HE, and more particularly concerning the raising numbers of non-traditional adult students (NTAS).

Even though we use the terminology of 'non-traditional', this expression (as well as other words, such as 'adult' or 'mature') acquires a semantic nature and understanding also in relation to the country, context and academic culture in which they are used. According to Portuguese legislation, there is a recent Law-Decree (2006) that regulates the entrance of NTAS in HE. This legal document mentions the generic characteristics that this non-traditional 'public' should demonstrate to enter HE institutions through this newly recent entrance system. Accordingly, NTAS are individuals over 23 years old, without secondary school diploma (or equivalent), that need to make specific exams in order to enter the University they will apply for. About this issue, some Portuguese

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Even though in the past we had the so-called ‘hard exams’, this was a clearly different path to enter HE. Now, with the Law-Decree of 2006, we may assume that Portugal is starting to be more in the line with what is happening in other countries around the world, particularly considering the European educational guidelines and principles of Lifelong Learning. According to Longworth and Davies (1998, p.22):

*“Lifelong Learning is the development of human potential through a continuously supportive process which stimulates and empowers individuals to acquire all the knowledge, values, skills and understanding they will require throughout their lifetimes and to apply them with confidence, creativity and enjoyment in all routes, circumstances, and environments.”*

Therefore, more discussions are needed specifically in what concerns (i) the impact this possibility opened to adults to enter HE is having at different levels (macro – country/financial and employability system; meso – HE institution; micro – individual), (ii) the pertinence and availability of suitable accreditation system that considers ‘life experiences’ as well as formal, informal and non-formal learning contexts, and (iii) the necessity of developing research in this area, since there are many questions that remain without answer at Portuguese HE settings.

Thus, within this generic context, that has a cross-country nature, this paper aims one main thing: to systematise and reflect about NTAS growing presence in HE institutions, since we assume that their particular characteristics will ask for different approaches, namely at pedagogical level. Firstly, we intend to synthesise the main characteristics that distinguish NTAS from those called ‘regular’ or ‘traditional’ students (section 2). Thereafter, we will discuss possible implications that the growing numbers of NTAS may have to HE institutions, especially to university pedagogy (section 3). Bearing in mind these two intentions, we consider that this paper may contribute to an international discussion on this subject in particular and educational psychology in general.

## **2. Non-traditional adult students: Reviewing some important characteristics**

Nowadays, it can be assumed that students who are entering HE institutions either for undergraduate or postgraduate levels have more diversified and heterogeneous characteristics. NTAS, as stated above, can be considered as one of these groups. It is thus expected that HE as a whole considers this reality as a challenge and designs coherent and systematic strategies that support diversity, creating a culture and both pedagogical and research environments that respond to diverse changes, requests, and demands. Reinforcing this idea, Gonçalves (2007) emphasises that HE institutions which open their doors to this ‘public’ have to (i) create conditions to integrate these students, (ii) adapt their own cultural and social organisation and dynamics so a suitable integration is made, and (iii) make lifelong learning strategies a reality. Moreover, several studies (American Association of State Colleges and Universities, n/d; Conrad, 1993) highlight the pertinence of creating support services, so that adult students can overcome a set of barriers that the so-called ‘traditional students’ usually do not face.

Today’s world and society – the ‘knowledge society’ and “*the life-world becoming*” (Barnett, 1997, p.41) – clearly demand for ‘new’ skills, abilities, qualifications, competences, and knowledge. Consequently, it requires that an engaged citizen seeks for learning and training opportunities throughout their lifetime, as stated above (Longworth & Davies, 1998). It is essential a constant update to be able to respond effectively to the world intense requests. Therefore, it is expected that adults, even those with a considered ‘solid’ experience in the labour market, think of (re)initiating their academic path in HE, for the most various reasons. Although Portuguese Universities are aware that these older students are a growing ‘new’ reality, it seems very difficult to provide them with suitable answers. As a consequence, when approaching this issue, it is essential to systematise the characteristics these NTAS usually present.

Even though in Portugal we do not find many studies that approach this subject, there are authors (Correia & Mesquita, 2006) that clearly state that NTAS are adult people who: (i) dropped out school earlier, (ii) may not have academic qualifications, (iii) have been apart from formal academic system quite a while, (iv) do not have previous

experience in HE, and (v) may come from low economic and social groups of society. Correira and Mesquita (2006) consider that one or more of these factors could be observed. Following the same idea, other scholars (Santiago, Rosa & Amaral, 2000, p.25) have pointed out:

*“The mature student, besides being older has not in general, followed, or has been excluded by the selective characteristics of the traditional non higher education route, and in most cases does not hold a certificate or diploma of secondary education. In general the mature student is either employed, or being unemployed has decided to improve the prospects of his own personal and/or professional career, by obtaining a higher education diploma or degree.”*

The previous Portuguese authors have clearly emphasised what other international studies have already referred, namely concerning social and academic generic aspects. It is agreed that NTAS (i) have several responsibilities and commitments at work and at home; (ii) many of them attend University in part-time, due to factors like limited time to study, few opportunities given by HE institutions concerning time schedules, and adults’ necessity of attending a full time work; (iii) they usually are financially independent, and (iv) they may have (or not) a high school diploma (American Association of State Colleges and Universities, n/d; Conrad, 1993; Rogers, 2002; Crawford, 2004; Shankar, 2004; Chao, DeRocco & Flynn, 2007; Hitchens-Smith, 2007; Baran & Maskan, 2011). As Kasworm (2003, p.3) underlines, NTAS represent

*“the status of maturity and developmental complexity acquired through life responsibilities, perspectives, and financial independence; and the status of responsible and often-competing sets of adult roles reflecting work, family, community, and college student commitments.”*

In fact, these students’ age and usually their maturity are clearly of key importance when trying to distinguish the differences between these ‘non-traditional’ and the ‘traditional’ students. Nevertheless, it is essential to consider Jarvis’ perspective (1995): *“adulthood is reached when individuals are treated by others as if they are socially mature and when they consider themselves to have achieved this status.”*

Among other aspects, we may emphasise several well-known studies which bring together important features of NTAS:

- They are more focused and *“have a self-defined goal prior to reentering college life”* (Shankar, 2004, p.3);
- They are intrinsically motivated with their own learning process, also because they are impelled by several objectives and desires in life (Crawford, 2004): personal, social, cognitive and professional goals, life transition or change, emotional and external expectations, escape purposes, and so on (Lovell, 1979; Jarvis, 1995);
- They have the capacity of contextualising ideas, subjects, competences and knowledge in a more generic perspective, namely in a professional context (Sewell, 2000);
- *“They bring with them a package of experience and values; they come to education with intentions; they bring expectations about the learning process; they have competing interests; they already have their own set of patterns of learning.”* (Rogers, 2002, p.71);
- *“Adults are autonomous and self-directed. (...) Adults have accumulated a foundation of life experiences and knowledge (...) Adults are goal-oriented. (...) Adults are relevancy-oriented.”* (Lieb, 1991, no page);
- They are deeply responsible for their own learning, attributing a purpose and utility to their intellectual capacities, learning process and competences’ development (Dupond & Ossandon, 1998).

Thus, in the teaching and learning process, spaces that cherish the value of experience, prior experiences, and contextual aspects must be created and considered, since all these facts will influence the way an adult student will appropriate and value knowledge and learning. It is then crucial that HE institutions and their ‘actors’ realise that:

*“Adult learning requires the building on this prior learning using methods that treat learners with respect and recognise that people have different learning styles and have a variety of responsibilities and time commitments. Effective education also recognises that adults often learn collectively from each other. For effective adult education the teacher becomes according to Knowles the ‘manager of the processes’ or the facilitator.”* (O’Brien, n/d, no page)

In this context, the role of the teacher - as a guide, a facilitator, an instigator - requires that s/he can also plan strategies which help the adult student to commit him/herself to (re)initiate a path through individual learning and management of learning and knowledge. Simultaneously, HE institutions, as already referred, must create an

environment that assumes heterogeneity as a current challenge that is not always fulfilled or achieved. Following this idea, these institutions must continuously question their role, the purposes that they need to accomplish, and above all the culture and mechanisms that should support diversity.

### 3. Non-traditional adult students: What implications to HE?

Taking into account the diversity and heterogeneity that characterise HE in general, as well as NTAS' features in particular, we believe that it is urgent that HE managers consciously think about possible strategies that may be put into practice to effectively respond to this group of students' expectations and demands. Even though these strategies need to be contextualised and discussed within Academia, we observe that in Portugal they are clearly important, since a lack of actions directed to this non-traditional 'public' is observed. At the same time, more research is needed within our national frontiers. The following topics suit themselves of a wide and transversal character. They were thought taking into account the 'new' demands of HE systems. Also, they clearly need to be discussed within the academic community of each Portuguese institution that opens its door to non-traditional 'publics':

- There is a need to design a systematic follow-up programme directed to non-traditional students. This could acquire both an optional and/or a compulsory character, according to the gaps and/or difficulties that could be identified. In any case, it would be essential to provide support to NTAS particularly in the phases of transition.
- The follow-up programme could be extended beyond a course completion. It would be extremely important to HE institutions to have external stakeholders' feedback, namely in terms of professional, economic and social impact. Also, personal and psychological impact could be one of the priorities of research.
- Professional development courses/programmes directed to HE teachers could be essential so they could have the opportunity to (i) improve their pedagogical methods, (ii) enhance the teaching and learning process, and (iii) be more aware of different students' profiles, giving them suitable answers tailored to their needs, expectations and even difficulties.
- Consequently, diverse teaching and learning strategies need to be promoted to respond to many requests of NTAS, namely regarding their educational, personal and even professional purposes. Moreover, classes could acquire different typologies.
- Following the last idea, more flexibility in classes' schedules should be assured.
- Mentoring and tutoring seem also to be important strategies to experiment, as well as modular systems and other flexible models of continuous education. Therefore, courses' curriculum should be more flexible.
- NTAS' characteristics should be valued, because they enrich the HE system and promote development. Consequently, mechanisms for recognition and accreditation of previous learning need to be progressively more efficient and open to diversity.
- More dynamic partnerships could be created, above all between HE institutions and companies and/or communities where NTAS work and live.

Many other aspects could be pointed out. But, above all, these are only a few strategies and suggestions that could be considered when discussing the needs that NTAS put to HE. When observing them, we become aware that the implications that non-traditional 'publics' bring to the HE system are huge, mainly because they put all homogeneity and structure into question. However, this must be considered an important consequence since today's world is not static. In fact, it stimulates human beings to always develop themselves, not only for personal goals, but also for social, cultural and economic purposes. Therefore:

*"(...) the increase and recognised importance of human capital for economic growth and social development – together with public interest in improving social and personal development – make it necessary to increase learning opportunities for adults within the wider context of lifelong learning."* (OECD, 2002, p.3)

### 4. Final considerations: Further studies

It is a fact: non-traditional 'publics' ask new/renewed questions to HE institutions. Therefore, discussions must

be promoted. After all, HE institutions are a powerful instrument of social transformation and thus, they must promote success and must continuously adjust themselves to an always emergent and changing reality.

Consequently, it seems extremely important to continue to develop research and discussions in this area. Moreover, research is needed in what concerns the growing number of NTAS who are starting to seek postgraduate studies. It will be then essential to understand (i) their motives and reasons to pursue a master but particularly a doctorate; (ii) their needs and questions regarding HE institution's role, as well as other support systems at a postgraduate level; (iii) the vision of themselves (as their own responsible for their learning and construction of knowledge and research) and of others (namely supervisors, colleagues and employers); (iv) the impact that postgraduate studies may have to their personal and professional lives, and other aspects.

To conclude, we can not forget that all this theoretical reflection is clearly embedded in Rogers' perspective about learning (Rogers, 2002, p.118):

*"Learning is embedded in living. (...) It occurs throughout life, from start to finish. (...) Learning, then, is natural, as natural as breathing. It is the continual process of adapting to the various changes we all face."*

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